



ERNEST COOK TRUST

learning from the land since 1952

• A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...
• FRANCIS STONE, ECT TENANT FARMER, MIDDLE FARM, BOARSTALL, BUCKS

Being evacuated into the depths of the countryside proved a life-changing experience for London-born Francis Stone.

It made him realise that he wanted to work on the land rather than live and work in a city. As a result, Francis chose farming as his career and, at 79, he is one of the Ernest Cook Trust's longest-serving tenants.

He looks back on his rural life as a 'dream come true' and, unusually for a farmer of his generation in the current climate, he can even look forward to his grandson taking over the tenancy, amply illustrating the Trust's commitment to encouraging family succession on its farms.

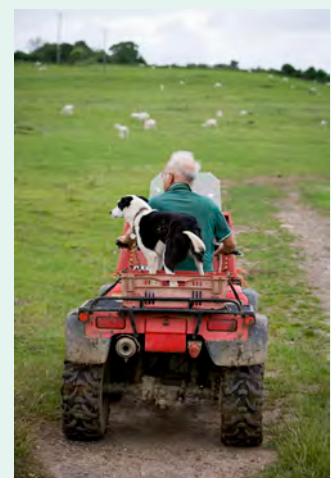
Francis took over the tenancy of Middle Farm on the Boarstall Estate in Buckinghamshire in 1956 at the age of 26. "It was just 90 acres at the time – my predecessor had let it all go to pot as he enjoyed the odd glass a bit too often!" he recalls. "He was able to pay his rent just from the sale of rabbits on his land; it's all a bit different now!"

He remembers feeling the need to impress the Trust's then agent, Captain Hill, all those years ago in order to get the tenancy.

"I didn't know anything about the Ernest Cook Trust at the time, but I remember meeting Captain Hill one day at the County Show when it was held at Hartwell House. He introduced me to a dapper, very shy chap called Ernest Cook, and I shook his hand. Little did I realise the impact his Trust would have on the rest of my life! I must be one of the few tenants still alive who met Mr Cook."

Francis describes himself as being "very fortunate" to be an ECT tenant. "Over the years, I have been able to build the farm up to 500 acres of arable, with a suckler herd and a flock of ewes.

"When I came here, the Trust owned the whole of the Parish, then the M40 motorway ploughed through the middle and land was sold off, so I am the only tenant farmer left. But it's a workable-size farm and I am more confident than most in this business of the future of my farm."



Although livestock has been Francis's forte, with quite a few prizewinners over the years, he has a soft spot for his horses. Indeed, until he bought a quad bike, he still used the horses for shepherding: "I'm getting too old to ride the horses now but they still give me a lot of pleasure, although I have to admit the quad is much more efficient."

In the late 1950s, the Boarstall Estate had three farms, each able to support a family and employ one or two men. Now Francis farms all three holdings with just one employee, Richard Hornett, who has been with him for 40 years.

It hasn't all been a life of farming though. Francis and his late wife Pam regularly welcomed troops of Scouts to camp on the farm, and were also stalwarts of the Aylesbury Young Farmers. With Dick Woodford, Francis was part of the AYFC's champion tug of war team, reaching AAA status with the national Tug of War Association.

Although he has seen some drastic changes in the farming life, Francis is optimistic for the future.

"My son-in-law gave up farming to go into building, but my grandson Edward Tompkins caught the farming bug and came in with me. He's a very enterprising young man, with lots of ideas, so I helped him set up a separate beef supply business, Boarstall Beef, which is doing very well. He sells his beef locally and goes up to Twickenham Farmers' Market once a week. He puts a bit of straw in his hair and the customers can't get enough of the good grass-fed beef straight from the farm!"

Francis has high hopes for his great grandson Lewis too. "He's on the farm a lot – he prefers the tractors to computer games, so you never know. But it surprises me how little other young people know about where their food comes from," he said.

"I think the work the Trust does to help young people understand more about farming and the countryside is great; I'm all for it. It is astounding how little young people understand these days about the countryside. It's wonderful that children can come and see for themselves how it all works thanks to the work of the Trust.

"Being a farmer was a dream come true for me; it isn't work, it's a way of life - although I always say, my contemporaries want to retire to a house in the country, but I started out with a house in the country, and have been tired ever since!"



Grandson Edward (above and below) and great-grandson Lewis (below)

